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EUROPEAN AND ASIAN AFFAIRS, AND OFFICE OF
CIVILIAN RADIOACTIVE WASTE MANAGEMENT (OCRWM)
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STATE PLS PASS NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

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SUBJECT: FRANCE'S YUCCA MOUNTAIN

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Summary

11. (U) On July 26, 2005, in the context of the upcoming national debate and the 2006 law on nuclear waste of high-level, long-lived radioactive waste (HLLW) (see reftels), EST Counselor, Science Affairs Specialist, and EST Intern, met officials of the French National Radioactive Waste Management Agency (ANDRA) during a visit to the Aube waste disposal facility and the underground research laboratory in Bure, Meuse/Haute Marne, near the French border with Luxembourg. Essentially, the latter facility is 'France's Yucca Mountain.' In addition to the technical aspects of the day-to-day management of both sites, EST Staff discussed the issue of public acceptance of the facilities as well as the future of HLLW underground disposal in France. After a period of experiments at the Bure site, it will soon be time for France to make a decision at the national level regarding deep geologic storage. With the political intricacies of nuclear energy issues and the recent nomination of Francois-Michel Gonnot as ANDRA president, a member of parliament experienced in negotiation and political decision-making, the elements are in place for a passionate debate and action with consequences for years to come. End summary.

Background: The Meuse/Haute-Marne Facilities

12. (U) Each year, France generates 2.2 lbs/person of nuclear waste, 10 percent of which is HLLW. ANDRA has a dual mission: management for the short-lived nuclear waste and research for the nuclear waste that cannot be handled by existing facilities, namely HLLW. The two sites visited provide a glimpse into both missions of ANDRA.

13. (U) The above-ground Aube site is designed to receive low and medium-level radioactive waste for storage. Containers of compressed nuclear waste embedded in concrete are processed every day at the site. As of today, 73 monumental concrete coffins, each containing 77,700 cubic feet of waste containers, have been filled and sealed. Management of the facility and monitoring its environmental impact are top priorities for ANDRA officials. As an independent government agency subject to strict regulation, ANDRA regulates demand and adapts prices for the waste-producing entities (Electricite de France, AREVA, and the Atomic Energy Commission) that also finance its activities. Preservation is another issue ANDRA takes into account, as the site is meant to blend in with the natural environment for hundreds of years after its closure.

14. (U) The Bure site was created in response to the 1991 law on management of

radioactive waste (see reftels). It was designed to host deep underground research facilities to test the containment properties of the Callovo-Oxfordian argillite (a type of dense clay formed over geological time) located more than 1500 ft underground. After slow progress in 2000-2003, the laboratory now operates at full capacity. Part of the progress observed on the site is due to the opportunity the researchers had to test the argillite material in the Mount Terri Laboratory, Switzerland. Moreover, the results and data produced in Bure are instantly electronically shared with members of a European research team. Thus far, the Bure scientists have been able to answer positively each of the questions posed regarding safety, feasibility and reversibility of deep geologic storage of high level radioactive waste at the site.

Public Acceptance: Highest Constant Priority

15. (U) Information and discussion with the public is a major part of ANDRA's mission. Although the two sites are located in low-population and low industrial activity areas, the storage site and laboratory attract intense questioning from the general public as well as local and foreign officials. Safety concerns and questions about the site have fostered close coordination between ANDRA and the neighboring populations. Presently, the modern information centers which contain extensive literature, interactive exhibitions and auditoriums for presentations, were built before the actual industrial or research facilities.

16. (SBU) Whereas the Aube site appears to have come to terms with the local population, the Bure laboratory still faces significant opposition. Part of the reason for this is the difference in level of potential 'dangerousness' between the nuclear wastes that are or could be processed on the sites. Although no nuclear material is yet present at Bure, and despite the fact that ANDRA is the largest employer in the region, officials anticipate tougher criticism as the project of building an underground disposal facility gains momentum.

17. (SBU) ANDRA officials identified four types of opposition within the local population:

-- Traditional "NIMBY-like" movements, to whom ANDRA points out the economic advantages and the overall safety of the Bure site. (ANDRA officials called the movement by the French words "Pas chez nous!")

-- "Anti" movements, a vocal group in France, that opposes Bure as well as nuclear energy, globalization, GMOs, and low quality standards for food. ANDRA finds rationalizing with the "anti everything" group very difficult.

-- "Anti-nuclear opposition" is another specific group. ANDRA responds to it by saying it neither supports nor rejects nuclear energy and the energy policy of the government. Its responsibility is to address the given problem of nuclear waste, by searching for acceptable solutions. ANDRA also reaffirms to this group the scientific nature of the laboratory, not designed to receive nuclear waste.

-- "Skeptic" movements. ANDRA focuses its outreach activity on this group who are concerned about the consequences of deep underground disposal. By making its results and activity available to the population, ANDRA hopes to gain support for a deep geological storage facility in the future.

18. (U) Publication of information (newsletters, magazines) and tours are two

of the main outreach activities led by ANDRA in Meuse/Haute Marne. ANDRA has also established a significant sponsorship program, as one of its objectives is to support science, research, environmental and cultural heritage protection initiatives. In 2003, for example, 41 sponsorship programs were established for a total amount of 37,000 euros. ANDRA has also agreed to pay for a supporting fund aimed at financing public facilities for the surrounding "communes" (villages). Although these activities can sometimes be denounced as "propaganda," officials assert that they contribute to public acceptance.

¶19. (SBU) The Bure site will be central to the public debate organized by the National Public Debate Commission (CNDP, www.debatpublic.com), in charge of organizing public consultations about major projects for national and regional development. In addition, some local officials have called for the launching of a petition asking for a local referendum about the underground storage facility project. One ANDRA escort said that the petition currently had more than twenty-thousand names on it. He was very aware of the negative correlation between those who sign a petition and a proposed underlying project (in this case the deep underground storage facility).

The Future of Bure: Politics, Money, and Uncertainties

¶10. (SBU) ANDRA sees 2006 as its most crucial year. After publishing a final report in June, the French National Assembly will study the future of nuclear waste management and, accordingly, the future of the Bure facilities. Chances are that the concept of deep underground storage will be accepted, but the current Bure facilities will in no way become the actual storage site. In case a storage facility is built on the model proposed by ANDRA, it will more likely be located in the same geologic deposit within some kilometers of the laboratory. The laboratory will retain its scientific purpose, as tests for the future storage systems will still be required.

¶11. (SBU) Financial issues will be at the core of the decision made by public authorities addressing deep geologic storage for long-lived highly radioactive waste. The first uncertainty that will have to be addressed is the funding of the future underground storage facility. For now, based on the 'polluter-payer' principle, waste producing companies provide most of the funding for ANDRA's activities. This same principle may be more difficult to apply for facilities that will be built in the decades to come, and for which no bottom line can be drawn. Companies are unlikely to commit themselves on such an unclear basis; consequently, lawmakers will have to come up with a solution in the upcoming legislation.

¶12. (SBU) The cost of storage will depend on the time decision-makers are willing to wait before transferring radioactive waste underground. This uncertainty is linked to the declining temperature of HLLW. High temperatures can alter the properties of the rock in which waste is buried. Callovo-oxfordian argillites are particularly sensitive to a change of temperature, which could be amplified if waste packages are disposed close to one another. In sum, if HLLWs are disposed when still hot, packages will have to be placed far from one another, hence increasing the length and the cost of the galleries. If decision makers are willing to wait, HLLWs can be placed closer to one another. The differences in cost can be enormous. One ANDRA official told Embassy representatives the difference between disposing "cold" or "hot" nuclear waste would be in the range of thirty billion Euros.

113. (SBU) The new chairman of ANDRA, Francois-Michel Gonnot, was appointed on May 31 as the head of ANDRA. A graduate of the French School of Political Sciences (Sciences Po), Gonnot is a former journalist and a member of Parliament representing the Oise department. He is a local politician who chaired the National Assembly Commission on Production and Trade and is a specialist on energy questions. His impact on the future debate on waste management is much awaited. However, by all accounts, he was chosen because of his substantial political experience, which will be critical during the months ahead in the charged debate (pun not intended) as the nuclear waste issue winds through the public, government, and Parliament.

14 (SBU) COMMENT: What struck EST staff in their visit to Bure was the sense that ANDRA officials and scientists had located a superb site for long-lived highly radioactive waste. Their continued experiments only confirm the results of previous ones highlighting the excellent confinement characteristics of the clay deposits. The science appears to be less for the benefit of understanding the characteristics of the site than for reassuring a skeptical local public. END COMMENT.

STAPLETON